

investigation that they are conducting with not just Democrats but also two very strong Republicans who have been willing to basically put their careers on the line because they believe so much in this democracy that we must get to the bottom of what happened.

The work going on in the Justice Department, which has now been, as of yesterday, as the Attorney General of the United States described to us, the biggest investigation in the history of America, because I don't think people had envisioned that we would have an attack like this, but we did.

Two hundred forty-four years of democracy—244 years of democracy—that it is our charge to protect, and that is why you see this investigation. That is why you see over 700 people charged. This is why you see the Attorney General pledge to follow this to every level and to follow the facts to where they go.

We must remember, in the end, as my colleague from Oregon Senator WYDEN has addressed, this is not just and was not just an attack on a building; it was an attack on our Republic.

I was looking back at the Inauguration Day and that beautiful moment with that blue sky, and there were little snowflakes coming down. I remember hearing the beautiful words of Amanda Gorman, in her gold coat, that day, with that amazing poem, the singing. I remember Garth Brooks singing "Amazing Grace." I looked up at the sky and thought that anything and everything is possible and our democracy has prevailed.

I remember the words of Abraham Lincoln, actually, which I quoted in my brief speech that day, when he gave his first inaugural address in front of this Capitol. The dome was only partially constructed—it was braced by ropes of steel back then—and he promised he would finish it. He was actually criticized for spending funds during the Civil War on the dome, as it was somehow frivolous. To those critics, he replied: "If people see the Capitol going on, it is a sign we intend the Union shall go on."

When we gathered that day on that inaugural stage, there was still spray paint on the columns. They actually couldn't get it all out because the insurrectionists had first come to that platform because—just as they knew what was going on in the Parliamentary Office, they targeted that platform because that is exactly where President Biden and Vice President HARRIS were going to receive their oaths of office. There were still traces of spray paint. The windows behind us weren't the real windows; they were makeshift windows. But we all gathered there. The President-elect, now President, would not have his inauguration in a bunker. Senator BLUNT and I strongly believed that this should be a public event. As we stood out there, "The Capitol shall go on"—that was the message we were sending to the country.

So what does that mean right now, a year later, this anniversary, "The Capitol shall go on"? Yes, it means that we have better security, and we do better by our police officers, and we have their backs. It means that. We do better by the staff in this great building. Yes, it means we have accountability for the people who had the audacity to invade this Capitol and take the law into their own hands and commit acts of violence. But the other thing it has to mean a year later is that we carry on that torch of our democracy, as the Senator from Oregon explained, that we make sure our very democracy is protected.

(Ms. CORTEZ MASTO assumed the Chair.)

That means guaranteeing that people have the right to vote.

What was not accomplished that day with the bear spray and the bayonets and the flagpoles sadly carried on because these bills that have been introduced in so many States and passed across the country—over 400 of them passed in many, many States across the country or proposed, seriously proposed, in others—bring us backwards. It basically says: You know what. Democracy—the people who propose these bills—is not about who votes for whom, regardless of who wins; it is about us choosing our voters and deciding haves and have-nots and who is going to be able to vote and who isn't going to be able to vote.

When you think about what the people of this country will do to preserve that right to vote—I think about those people in Wisconsin with homemade masks and garbage bags, standing in the pouring rain at the beginning of the pandemic just to exercise their right to vote.

I think about the veteran I met when we did our field hearing with Senators WARNOCK and OSSOFF and Senators MERKLEY and PADILLA down in Atlanta. This veteran told us that he had signed up to serve our country, and there wasn't a waiting line, but when he went to exercise his right to vote, he had to wait hours and hours—4, 5 hours—in line in the hot Sun just to exercise his right to vote. He told the stories of older people who had left because they couldn't stand the heat, they couldn't stand out there anymore.

That is not what our democracy is supposed to look like. It is not supposed to look like one ballot box in the entire county of Harris County, which includes Houston in Texas, over 5 million people with one ballot drop-off box. That is not our democracy.

But the American people in that 2020 election said: You know what. No matter what you do to us, we are going to go vote. And they voted in droves. They voted more votes than in the history of America. Part of that was because, because of the pandemic, changes were made to the law, including that some States took away ridiculous requirements that you have to get a notary public. Think about it—in the middle of a pandemic.

Right now, by the way, South Carolina has put this law back into effect. To get your mail-in ballot because you can't go vote in person because you have COVID, you have to have a notary public. There are stories reported in the news of people having notary publics, through the glass windows of hospitals, sign off on the application of ballots. All of that is designed, in the words of Reverend WARNOCK, so that some people don't allow some people to vote. That is what that is about.

So it is on us right now to carry on the democracy. And that feeling we had when the leaders of both parties all stood on that inaugural stage or when we took that last walk, Senator BLUNT and Vice President Pence and I and the two young women with the mahogany box with the last of the electoral ballots—that feeling was a good one, and it was a celebration of joy for our country and the peaceful transition of power.

As pointed out in our speeches on the Senate floor right after the insurrection—I remember Senator SHAHEEN standing right there talking about how the world is watching our democracy. Well, this is another moment. The world is watching as we see dictators coming into power in other countries around the world, as we see the former President still out there rallying the troops around this Big Lie that he somehow won the election when every single local election official in this country knows that is not true. This is our moment to stand up to that because the people are watching. Our kids are watching. And the democracy stands in the breach. This is our moment. We must pass the Freedom to Vote Act, and we must uphold our democracy.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. VAN HOLLEN). The Senator from Nevada is recognized.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Ms. CORTEZ MASTO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

SOUTH SUDAN

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, several months ago, I spoke of the hope we all felt that after decades of civil war, famine, and political turmoil, after millions were killed and millions more became refugees including thousands of "lost boys" and "lost girls," South Sudan's independence and a peace agreement would be the beginning of a period of lasting stability and progress.

Regrettably, what has unfolded since then is the antithesis of stability or